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ABSTRACT

Jean Piaget's theories of child development and the nature of intelligence are adapted to creative dramatics in this description of two games for children aged 6 through 12. The first game discussed incorporates a "touchy-feely box," a cardboard construction with openings on two sides so that a child may reach inside, select, and describe an object without seeing it. The second game described involves the teacher in displaying pictures of various zoo animals, discussing the animals' characteristics, asking the children to recreate the animal on paper or with modeling materials after the picture is put away, and then asking them to provide sounds and imitative body movements of the animals. The paper suggests that it would be beneficial to educators if there were continued exploration of the ways Piaget's psychological studies and gaming strategies might be applied to future investigation of the communication and performance arts. (AEA)

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"Piaget In Performance: The Role Of 'Games' In Creative Dramatics" *

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In a somewhat quixotic sense, Jean Piaget's theories of child development and the nature of intelligence have only recently made their way into the arena of creative drama; and then only in rather isolated classroom experiments by those who see in Piaget's cognitive research a natural and appealing parallel between "creative thinking" [1] and "creative performing." [2]

No doubt part of the difficulty in adapting Piaget's theories earlier to creative dramatics lies in the perplexing ambiguity, and clinical terminology, with which he couches his definitions. "Intelligence," for example, is both a "particular instance of biological adaptation" [3] and "the form of equilibrium toward which all the [cognitive] structures...tend." [4]

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Regardless of the biological orientation inherent in his phrasing, central to Piaget's theories on child development, and its subsequent manifestation in intelligence and creativity, is the suggestion that 'games' are a complex but integral variant in developing learning skills.

The theoretical framework and the empirical propositions which are necessary to foster learning skills are to be found exclusively in those "structured" events which explore a child's understanding of space, time or causality; or in those "activities" which encourage "acting operation," [5] and promote mental activity or interaction with another.

In addition to these basic prerequisities for gaming that allow a child to both "accomodate" and " assimilate" [6] his experience into a meaningful learning blueprint for future reference, Piaget also postulates restrictive guidelines for fashioning games and sets up organizational limitations for conducting games.

For example, Piaget's experiments in the psychology of childhood "schemes" [7] revealed that the attention span of the infant was extremely limited and that his "world view" incorporated "objects" moreso than "language." [8] There was also the tendency of the infant to approach "reality" in terms of

"concrete" situations, and to often fail to take into any account the alternative possibilities inherent in a given situation.[9]

But the most startling discovery made by Piaget, and the one most convenient to a discussion of the role that creative dramatics and 'games' might play in developing recognizable learning skills, was that most children are "egocentric" and respond more to "states" of being than to "transformations" of being; and the implication that because of this egocentricity in a child he is often incapable of the "symbolic" adaptation from experience to event.[10]

In light of these scientific findings, reached admittedly upon rather restrictive laboratory conditions, the question should now be posed regarding the mutual compatibility of Piaget's theoretical approach to 'games' and the creative dramatics performance approach to'games.'

At first glance, it would appear that Piaget and creative dramatics are well-suited fellow travelling companions, for their use of games has much in common. Both, for example, stress the notion that a child's initial development depends to a large extent on environmental surroundings; and that a child should be afforded the opportunity to engage in non-verbal

exercises which transcend the traditional means of communication.[11]

There are also the significant parallels to be drawn between a similiar approach to those games which provoke a spontaneous reaction to a specified set of stimuli, or those games which are structured specifically to encourage a child to differentiate between illusion and reality.[12]

Regardless of the theoretical or the performance approach to games, however, there are several of Piaget's gaming suggestions which appear better suited to the creative dramatics classroom than to the analytical laboratory; and it is these, when incorporated with creative dramatics, which appear most relevant to the instructor concerned with initiating learning skills or developing language skills.

The first Piagetian game ripe for creative dramatics adaptation is based on the theory of "logico-mathematical" [13] relationships, and is intended to demonstrate that knowledge is not a direct result of perceiving objects, but of actions performed on objects.

To illustrate the logico-mathematical factor Piaget had cited a childhood friend's experience with counting pebbles and placing them in neatly-ordered rows,[14] and drew the conclusion

that through the repetition of counting and arranging the child learned an important element of mathematical number: it remains constant despite recounting or rearranging.

When translated to a creative dramatics game, this theoretical instructional tool assumes the added dimension of teaching the properties of objects and the use of objects. Begin with a "touchy-feely box," a cardboard construction with openings on two sides so that a child may reach his hands inside without being able to see the hidden objects, and have each child select an object.[15] Following a selection, the child should be given the opportunity to describe the object in as much detail as possible. In the verbalization of the object, concentrate on the color, the texture, the shape and the weight of the object so that the child will be able to sense the need to distinguish similarities and differences in other objects.

For each individual verbalization, there should also be a discussion of the "function" of the object so that the child is able to associate its individual characteristics with a special usage. Here, it is often convenient to pose questions that begin with "Is it like," "Does it remind you of" or "What do you have that is...".

When each child has made a selection and there has been sufficient development of the description and function of the

object, proceed to the second phase of the gaming experiment: the pairing of mutually agreeable objects based upon their stated function.

Here it is imperative that the teacher permit the children to make their own decisions regarding the compatibility of objects (and, of course, if "mistakes" happen that makes the learning experience even more valuable). Some common examples of the pairing at this stage of the exercise might be the child with the apple and the child with the pear, the child with the paper and the child with the pen, or the child with the plate and the child with the cup.

The exercise is repeated a third and a fourth time, with appropriate discussion following each successive pairing so that there is general agreement that all objects have been grouped according to their function. Following the final pairing, the exercise concludes with a performance by the children demonstrating the use of the object in an imaginary environment. For example, the child with the plate and the child with the cup may well have been paired with another child with a spoon and yet another child with a table cloth; and their creative performance, using the logico-mathematical impulse, might well be a conversation related to eating or household duties.

Regardless of the individual instructor's approach to this particular Piagetian-inspired game, it proves in fact to be an invaluable tool in the instruction of functional relationships and values; and the complimentary performance aspect is an excellent preliminary exercise for preparing a child to engage in later symbolic representations.

The need for symbolic representation, or creative imitation, is the second theoretical game which bears ripe fruit for the creative dramatics harvest and is based on Piaget's theory of "Mental Symbols," [15] which are intended to develop the ability to make something---a mental image, a word or an object---stand for or represent something else which is not present.

It was Piaget's belief that such mental symbols permit a child to "construct" his own creative experience more accurately and more intelligently than an adult might, and that the sequence of images possible to represent could be "indexed" by using pictures, three-dimension models, onomatopoeia language, real or imagined objects and imitative body movements.

The possibilities presented by Piaget's blueprint for evoking mental symbols lead to a variety of creative dramatics games in the classroom, and the provisional index proves to be the necessary element of structure that is so often found

lacking in similiar attempts to externalize a child's imagination.

For example, the very common creative dramatics game of visiting a zoo gains added dimension when structured by Piaget's theoretical dictates. The instructor begins the classroom project by carefully selecting appropriate pictures to represent the animals found in a zoo. Accompanying each picture there is discussion regarding the physical characteristics of the selected animal, the eating habits of the animal and the images provoked by seeing the animal.

When the instructor is satisfied that the child is aware of the basic characteristics of the animal, and has a lasting visual impression, the picture is put away and the child is given paper, clay or any other modeling materials and asked to recreate the animal as it appears in his memory. Following this recreation, the original picture is unveiled and there is comparison and commentary between the initial animal image and the subsequent symbolic representation as fashioned by the child.

The next step in the exercise is to combine onomatopoeia language, sound which suggests the word or action, and imitative body movements. This combination of principles involves the class, in either groups or individually, using both

voice and body to externalize the selected animal. Although the exercise may also be accompanied by appropriate music or even sound effects, it is generally best to allow the child to express his own mental images without any adult assistance because the creative act of a child's being able to bridge his limited sensorimotor knowledge and limited representational knowledge is the constructive path that leads to the final phase of the exercise: the use of objects, real or imagined, to represent other objects.

This concluding application of Piaget's index to evoking mental symbols, and encouraging individual skills in verbal and non-verbal communication, involves incorporation of all the "complimentary" objects necessary to complete the zoo portrait.

Whether the exercise is envisioned to evoke only those objects associated with individual animals, or those objects associated with the environment of the zoo, the principle remains the same. The child is encouraged to give his mental images "free play," and is provided with boxes, stools, chairs or other "real" objects to use in representing those complimentary objects associated with his symbolic images.

There is also the graduated variation of the mental symbol game, employed whenever the instructor is confident that the child has mastered the basic techniques of a self-structured imagination, in which the child must rely solely upon "Mime" to recreate and give representation to his images.[17]

In any event, this Piaget-inspired game encourages the child to willingly enter the symbolic world of his imagination and, hopefully, to discover there the framework to give voice to his mental images. It also helps the child to strengthen his ability to understand the relationship between an object that "is" and an object that "might be," or the cognitive realization that creative representation allows mental symbols to become whatever the viewer says they might be.

Although the correlation of Jean Piaget's theories on games, and their subsequent relationship to creative dramatics, has been slow to assimilate into an overall perspective of his thoughts on child development, it is apparent from these isolated examples of creative adaptation that he has provided the conscientious teacher of the adolescent with a storehouse of innovative and thought-provoking principles with which to construct the building blocks for future creative dramatics experimentation.

It would be beneficial to all concerned if there is continued exploration of the ways his psychological studies

and gaming strategies might further be applied to an investigation of the communication and performance arts, and it would certainly be a most beneficial venture for those engaged in the art of creative dramatics.

FOOTNOTES

[1] A term implied in Piaget's discussion of "mental symbols." See Jean Piaget, Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood, trans. by C. Gattegno and F. M. Hodgson (New York, 1962), pp. 61-64.

[2] See Viola Spolin, Improvisation for the Theatre (Illinois, 1963), pp. 3-4 and pp. 279-281.

[3] Jean Piaget, The Origins of Intelligence in Children, trans. by M. Cook (New York, 1952), p. 34.

[4] Jean Piaget, The Psychology of Intelligence, trans. by M. Percy and D. E. Berlyne (London, 1950), p. 6.

[5] Ibid., p. 7.

[6] Piaget initially uses these terms in describing the physiological example of digestion, but they may also be related to 'gaming' in the sense that accomodation refers to the individual's tendency to change in response to environmental demands; and assimilation refers to the complementary process by which the individual deals with an environmental event in terms of his current structure. See Herbert Ginsburg and Sylvia Opper, Piaget's Theory of Intellectual Development (New Jersey, 1969), pp. 17-19.

[7] Any organized or structured pattern of behavior, like

an infant's nursing, is termed a "scheme" by Piaget. Ginsburg and Opper, however, offer an interesting variation of that theme. See pp. 20-22.

[8] Ibid., p. 219.

[9] Ibid., p. 220.

[10] Ibid., pp. 218-220.

[11] See Spolin, Improvisation for the Theatre, pp. 175-184.

[12] Ibid., pp.

[13] Jean Piaget, "Development and Learning," as quoted in Piaget Rediscovered, R. E. Ripple and V. N. Rockcastle, eds. (New York, 1964), p. 12.

[14] Ibid.

[15] The most appropriate objects are those of varying shapes, sizes and textures. It is also useful to have objects of a familiar nature, like pens, hats, keys, so that the children may use them more creatively in the final phase of the exercise.

[16] Piaget, Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood, p. 63.

[17] Presentational mime games require no special objects or props and are excellent externalizations for developing mental images. They are often preceded by a host of the "let's pretend" exercises, and may be as simple as "show" what imaginary objects do when put to use, "imitate" a particular mood or behavorial pattern or "recreate" in drama style an event or happening of recent nature.